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FRENCH REALISM IN ENGLISH LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT

Realism is a literary movement that represents reality by portraying mundane, everyday experiences as they are real in life. As in simple terms, we can say that Realism is a representation of reality. Realism is most often associated with the mid nineteenth century movement that developed in France. The French literature has given the world some of the most famous French realist writers. Among them immortal French realist writers are Racine, Moliere, Balzac, Flaubert and Maupassant. Their writings are sometimes romantic and vivid, and at other times more realistic showing societal concern. Their short stories exemplify the defining qualities of Realism. We can easily visualize that their works cover the panorama of French life describing different social classes and their struggle.

**Keyword:** Realism, French, Nineteenth Century, Reality, Writers, Societal Concern

It was in the nineteenth century France that realism attained its most coherent formulation, with echoes, parallels and variations elsewhere in Europe and America. The term Realism, is an expression applied to literature of the nineteenth century, implies the attempt to depict contemporary life and society. French Realism involves various aesthetic, social and scientific issues. As intellectual and artistic movement in the nineteenth century, Realism and Naturalism are responses to Romanticism. Realism's most important influences have been on fiction and the theater.

As we know that the history of realism finds its roots somewhere around the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly from 1830-70. The basic fundamental of realism is that it inaugurates itself as a way of thought, more than a movement within a definite genre. It aims to explain an object, scene or even a subject through the perceivable way by opposing all romanticism and subjectivism or any other rudiments which may mislead something as it really exist. In the words of Eric Auerbach's point of view, best exemplified. Auerbach's Mimesis 1948,

“That Realism is an age old ubiquitous literary phenomena, tends to extenuate the historical importance of French Realism and reduce this many sided movement to only one aspect, faithfulness to reality.” (Ruan Wei, 1986)

Hence, Realism is a literary movement that represents reality by portraying mundane, everyday experiences as they are in real life. It depicts familiar people, places and stories primarily about the middle and lower classes of society.

It is perhaps unsurprising that its origin can be traced to France, where the dominant official Neo-classicism had put up a long struggle against Romanticism. The French novelist Honore de Balzac is generally held as the grandfather of literary Realism. Apart from being a writer, novelist and playwright, he was also a literary critic and journalist and printer. He described about an unfiltered view of society. He was the most prominent representative of the nineteenth century realism in fiction. He was also a keen observer of his surrounding reality from boyhood. As in his words,

“Power is not revealed by striking hard or often, but striking true.” (Juan Ramos, 2018)

He published several plays and many short stories. His works are collectively known as the *Comedie Humaine* (Human Comedy), because of depth and range of their depiction of not only ordinary life in 19<sup>th</sup> century France, but more broadly the human condition.

Realism became vibrant in France in 1850s. A controversy was sparked by the painter Gustave Courbet, who exhibited his art under the rubric of Realism after his paintings had been rejected by the Paris World Fair in 1855. Realism as a movement in art and literature was established in the middle of the nineteenth century. The first appearance of the term is associated with the French novelist Champfleury, who endorsed it during the 1840s. It was however Gustave Courbet, who actually established the term when in 1855, he opened a solo exhibition which he called *Le Realisme*. Edmond Duranty started a journal by the name of *Realisme* in 1856, in which Realism was equated with truthfulness, sincerity and the modern. Duranty thought that novel should incarnate the lives of ordinary middle class-or working class people.

Realism in France took on more overt aspect in the work of Taine. He was influenced by the rationalist philosophers, on the other hand, and by Hegel and Spinoza on the other. As for Gustave Flaubert's great novel *Madame Bovary* 1852, which reveals the tragic consequences of romanticism on the wife of a provincial doctor and sentimental education represented perhaps the highest stage in the development of French realism. Before the nineteenth century writer were not interested in representing everyday life in their works. So, before the 1800's writers did not depict everyday life in their work. It doesn't mean that everything produced before then was in realm of fantasy. It is simply, that writers did not often write about ordinary people leading ordinary lives, at least not at the level of details as some did from the nineteenth century. It was the beginning of 1840s when the tendency towards Realism arose in many parts of Europe and America. The major figures who contributed the movement included Flaubert and Balzac in France, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy in Russia, George Eliot and Charles Dickens in England and Henry James in America. The basic aim of this movement was to offer, a truthful accurate, and objective representation of real world, both the external world and the human self.

Talking about French Realism, then Maupassant was also one of the most prominent realism writers. Maupassant eventually broke with the Naturalist movement in order to concentrate on realism and became a prominent, through reclusive writer during the *Fin-de-siecle* period. His stories present the panorama of French life of later nineteenth century, which included different social classes, such as peasantry, bureaucracy and moreover he examined common person and their problems. When we minutely analyze the novels, romances and short stories of Maupassant, it would suffice to demonstrate, even we didn't know the nature of the incidence which promoted them that he also suffered from an access of nervous emotionalism. A tragic episode of *Mademoiselle Fifi*, *La Pettit Roque*, *La Masque*, *La Horla*, and among the romances “*Une Vie*” and “*Pierre et Jean*”.

In nearly each of his fictional text, short stories and novels, we can situate a point of rupture in the unity and the fluidity of the characters identity and social status. Each of his fictional text illustrates the theme of social injustice and the consequent victimization of the individual. Moreover, his experiences as a soldier also give material for some of his finest stories. For example, his masterpiece “*Boule de Suif*” expresses the author's disgust of degradation and folly of war.

Thus, Maupassant was truly at the center of the European thought and his works bears its legacy. At first associated with the naturalist movement, he eventually turned to realism.

Hence, the implication of the word realism in French literature are so varied that the magnitude of the subject is even greater than it appears at first sight. But the real French realist were Racine, Moliere, Boileau, La Bruyere, and Lesage. (Editor Eric)

Jean Racine was primarily a tragedian producing such example of neo-classical perfection as Phedre, Andromaque and Athalie. Racine's plays displayed his mastery of do decasyllabic (12 syllable) French alexandrine. Racine's plays are literary masterpieces, keeping within the bounce of classics and making good use of the means it put at his disposal. He created works of great inner harmony and beauty, which depict human relationship ruled by passion, and the contradictions and conflicts of the moral world of the individual. His writing is renowned for its elegance, purity, speed and fury and for what American poet Robert Lowell described as,

“A diamond edge, and the glory of its hard, electric rage.” (Racine, wiki)

Coming towards Moliere, Jean -Baptiste Poquelin, known by his stage name Moliere, was a playwright actor and poet widely regarded as one of the great writers in the French language and universal literature. Moliere's each play presents the characters with subtle differences and each is a masterly entertainment and satire in its own way. Among the first plays to show Moliere as a more serious satirist are “The school for Husbands” 1661 and “The school for wives” 1662. At the highest level is “The Misanthrope” 1666. It has become known as Moliere's most sophisticated play, but at the time it was one of his least popular productions. More than a century after its debut, the play became recognized as revolutionary and today is one of Moliere's most popular dramas, a masterpiece, combining tragedy and comedy comparable to Shakespeare's dark comedies such as “The Merchant of Venice” or “The Tempest”. Hence, his influence is such that the French language is often referred to as language of Moliere.

Next, Nicholas Boileau-Despreaux had a pervasive influence not only on French letters, but also on English and German poets and critics. His “L Art Poetique” (The Art of Poetry), first published in 1674, was translated into English by John Dryden. He helped the French public to appreciate the works of his friends Racine and Moliere. (Kathleen Sheetz, 2020)

But when we talk about realist style than the realist style started gaining momentum through Maupassant's work with use of narrative. He basically furthered Flaubert's invention of removing the personal and authorial voice from the work. He took this technique and used it in his short stories. By using this method he became very popular as a realist.

The essence of realism was social analysis, the study and depiction of life of man in society, of social relations, the relationship between the individual and the society, and the structure of society itself. The realist writers discern the general patter of the movements and counter-movements of various social forces behind individual events and phenomena. Thus, realism depends on the writers' cognition of reality. As Schiller's words,

“In order to seize the fleeting phenomenon, one must chain it with the bonds of a law, dismembering the beautiful body into concepts and preserve its living spirit in the spare verbal framework.” (Lbizen, 18)

The connotations of the word realism in French literature are so varied that the magnitude of the subject is even greater than appears at first sight. In its later developments, realistic literature presented a considerable problems, and a constant source of irritation to the guardians of the academic portals to fame. French literature is simultaneously suspected by the moralists of outrages licentiousness, and credited by ingenuous youth with an ideal tolerance of the freedom of the artists, the fortunes of the realistic school from this point onward are instructive. Balzac having been canonized and Flaubert being accepted for his Romanticism tempered by realism, it might be imagined that the course of true literature ran smooth. It didn't however, for their continued and extraordinary confusion as to what realist really was. (Ernest Boyd, 2013)

While Realism as a distinct creative method, that made possible analysis of social environment and the casual relationship present their made for an objective portrayal of reality, each realist writer had his own highly individual view of the world. His view of events and his understanding of life and history reflect his attitude to the contemporary social struggle in which he inevitably participates.

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Moving towards the distinct feature of the French realist movement. In the mid nineteenth century, it was insistence on the equal claim to the literary treatment of the ugly and vulgar as well as beautiful, the elegant and noble. The argument is basically that realism aims to attain truth, and truth is attainable only by observation of that reality and a faithful representation of that reality in the work of art.

Thus, French realism involves various aesthetics, social and scientific issues. French realist authors depicted contemporary life and society including everyday common duties in their stories. These writers sought to represent life without any type exaggeration and attempted to write honestly about topics and themes. They also addressed, social, economic, and political concern through their depiction of various aspects of life during that time, and they strived to accurately represent contemporary culture and people from every echelon of society.

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